



Central Asian transitions: a health check

by Martin Breitmaier

In summer 2016, two unexpected events brought the issue of power transition to the top of the agenda in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. On 29 July, the Kyrgyz Parliament introduced a bill for a controversial constitutional referendum, sparking outrage among the Kyrgyz opposition, which sees it as an attempt by President Almazbek Atambayev to secure executive power beyond the end of his single constitutional term which is due to expire next year. Meanwhile, on 2 September, Uzbekistan's president Islam Karimov died, forcing the Uzbek political elite to choose a new ruler for the first time in 25 years. Both transitions entail risks for Central Asia's stability. But they also open up opportunities for further domestic liberalisation and regional cooperation.

Testing the constitution

The most recent attempt to amend the Kyrgyz constitution has drawn strong domestic and international criticism and shows further cracks in Kyrgyzstan's reputation as Central Asia's flagship democracy. The referendum will take place on 11 December simultaneously with the Kyrgyz local elections. It violates a special clause of the country's 2010 constitution that prohibits any constitutional amendments until 2020. Also, opponents argue that the amendments would weaken the independence of the judiciary, decrease the power of parliament and the president, and strengthen the prime minister and his cabinet. While President Atambayev has pledged to step down in December

2017, critics expect him to use the amendments to secure key executive positions for himself or his protégés.

The constitutional row is increasingly dividing Kyrgyzstan's political elite. On 26 October, the Social Democratic Party of Kyrgyzstan (SDPK), formerly led by Atambayev and presently the biggest faction in parliament, left the ruling coalition due to disagreements with its political partners 'Onuguu-Progress' and 'Ata Meken' over the referendum. Subsequently, the SDPK formed a new ruling coalition with the parties 'Bir Bol' and 'Kyrgyzstan', both of which are perceived as loyal to the president. The new cabinet features several allies of Atambayev, the most controversial of these being his ex-bodyguard and former head of the Kyrgyz anti-corruption agency, Ulan Israilov, now the interior minister.

On 14 November, Atambayev's conflict with the opposition further escalated. The Kyrgyz National Security Committee presented the president's office with documents allegedly attesting the involvement of three members of Ata Meken, its chairman Omurbek Tekebayev as well as Aida Salyanova and Almambet Shykmamatov, in a corruption scheme linked to an offshore company registered in Belize. All three politicians are vocal opponents of the constitutional referendum. They have denied their involvement in 'Belizegate', claiming the documents were falsified to discredit them. On 22 November, Tekebaev announced that his party would launch impeachment proceedings against Atambaev for

failing to end his membership and support of the SDPK upon becoming president, as prescribed by the constitution. Meanwhile, several civil society groups are campaigning against the constitutional amendments. Given the turbulent context of the Kyrgyz revolutions of 2005 and 2010, which led to the ousting of then presidents Askar Akayev and Kurmanbek Bakiyev, increasing political instability and tensions around the referendum give cause for concern.

Stabilising the condition

When Uzbekistan's former president Islam Karimov died of a stroke in early September without leaving an official successor, the nature of the Uzbek succession emerged as a major source of international concern. Observers paid special attention to the head of the country's National Security Service Rustam Inoyatov, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Rustam Azimov and Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev as main contenders for the president's office. However, the Uzbek political elite apparently arrived at a consensus quite swiftly and on 8 September, Prime Minister Mirziyoyev was appointed interim president. On 4 December, he won an early presidential election in which he ran without being challenged by serious competitors.

Since his appointment as temporary head of state, Mirziyoyev has been highly active. He has paid numerous visits to different Uzbek provinces and appointed several new ministers and *hakims* (heads of regional administration), thus reinforcing his power base. In what some observers have dubbed a 'charm offensive', Mirziyoyev has embarked on ambitious domestic reforms aimed at enhancing the Uzbek business climate, liberalising the currency market as well as improving transparency and accountability. Also, he is clamping down on corruption, as manifest in recent legislation, numerous dismissals and the deployment of government auditors to several Uzbek provinces.

Moreover, he is steering a new course in foreign policy. Since September, Uzbekistan's regional diplomacy has taken a pragmatic, reconciliatory approach strongly contrasting with the isolationism that characterised the past two decades. Mirziyoyev's attention has been focused primarily on the delimitation of borders with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the boosting of regional trade and investment ties and industrial cooperation. Symbolic of this new approach was a recent exchange of high-level 'delegations of friendship' between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and the Uzbek leadership's silence regarding Tajikistan's decision to resume construction of the Rogun hydropower station, long perceived as a key source of conflict in Tajik-Uzbek relations. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan is stepping up its bilateral cooperation with Russia and Turkey.

However, it is too early to announce the end of the Uzbek power transition. To further pursue a reconciliatory course in regional relations, Mirziyoyev's administration will have to find ways to project power in a constructive way. Domestically, it has to strike a balance between much needed reforms and the interests of the political elite as well as clan allegiances. Should Mirziyoyev decide to roll back his recent policies after the election or fall out with key figures such as Inoyatov and Azimov, this would negatively affect his legitimacy. Meanwhile, external actors such as the diaspora leader of the opposition parties 'Erk' and 'Popular Movement of Uzbekistan', Mukhammad Salikh, or al-Qaeda-aligned militant groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, might tap into potential internal divisions.

Rising temperature?

Both transitions might lead to domestic destabilisation. Tensions over water management, border delineation and inter-ethnic feuds mean that potential conflict in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan might spill over and affect the whole region. Since 2015, the Afghan Taliban have gained in strength and prevailed in their power struggle with Daesh. In north Afghanistan, the Taliban's influence has been showcased by the temporary seizures of Kunduz in 2015 and 2016 and an assault on the German General Consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif. Meanwhile, the 2016 attacks in Aktobe and Bishkek highlighted the ongoing threat posed by militantism to post-Soviet Central Asia.

However, if managed well, the transitions also provide room for positive developments. Should the Kyrgyz political elite succeed in de-escalating the current confrontation, this might strengthen the country's democratic foundations. Likewise, if Uzbek President Mirziyoyev follows through with his domestic promises and manages to improve cooperation with neighbouring states, this could boost regional cohesion and stability. The Kyrgyz and Uzbek transitions might equally affect the regional leverage of major international actors. For instance, the Mirziyoyev administration is notably increasing cooperation with Russia and Turkey while the Kyrgyz opposition criticises Atambayev for Kyrgyzstan's accession to the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. Moreover, potential regional reconciliation might encourage the Central Asian states to step up their coordination of external policies.

In sum, Central Asia is approaching a crossroads and the nature of the present and upcoming power transitions is key to future development.

Martin Breitmaier is a former Junior Analyst at the EUISS.

